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ABSTRACT

A college composition course based on teaching the difference between male and female modes of rhetoric offers advantages over the traditional course in reference, persuasive, and expressive discourse: the appeal to student emotion provided by the terms "female" and "male," and the clarity of the terms in delineating the possibilities and limitations of either response in a rhetorical situation. The course defines the male rhetorical mode as writing as a product of thinking, to get a point across in a clear, direct, convincing way: the female rhetorical mode is writing as a record of thinking, used to strengthen bonds between writer and reader. Students demonstrate their competence in the male mode two-thirds of the way through the course by writing two extended arguments on contrasting sides of an issue and then evaluating both their arguments in writing. They next are exposed to C. Rogers' form of argument in which the writer views the reader as hostile and not as simply skeptical or mildly supportive. Finally, students use the female mode in a situation where they describe themselves or someone else, evoking a mood or reflecting in a more general way. Shortcomings of this method are that competent male mode writers sometimes find it difficult to make the transition to the female mode: students may mistake rambling, irrational writing as the female mode: and the method lacks the simplicity of more traditionally organized composition courses. (AEA)

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Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric in an Advanced Composition Course

The fragments below are the second half of a four-part piece Tom, a student of mine, wrote to evoke memories of his early childhood. They are examples of what I will call in this paper the female mode, a type of expressive discourse that has a place in an upper-level composition course for its own sake and for what it, and the male mode, can teach students of the possibilities in a rhetorical situation:[1]

> Lying in bed, the sheet a knot at my feet and the hot, heavy air swirling like water over my body, I'd listen to the soft night noises of a sleeping household. Past the droning of the fan in Pat's room and between the rumbling or whine of a passing car came the rhythmic breathing, snorting and snoring of the people around me. Pat, of course, snored every night and snuck downstairs to wash his face with Sheila's Noxema when he thought everyone was asleep. He and Mike shared the small room upstairs while Tim, Kevin, and I slept in the bigger one. Mike borrowed the car a lot and came in late trying to get up the stairs without making them creak. Kevin and I were the only ones that could

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do that though. Tim got up early to do his paper route and his clock scraped just like a fork being pulled along a brick or the sidewalk out in front. Kevin was younger than I was and fell asleep most every night before he got into bed. He had to be picked up from the floor in front of the television and be carried up the stairs by someone, usually Pat or Mike, but sometimes Cathy.

The girls downstairs never made much noise at night, though you could always hear the light switch click on and the toilet flush when someone got up. I could almost tell who it was from upstairs where I was. When my father got up, he always put on his slippers and they'd flap and the floor would creak when he walked. Cathy would creak some too, but not as much, and Sheila would always slam the door no matter how late it was. Karen and my mother never got up at night, at least not when I was awake, and as for Gary and Dennis in the basement, they had their own bathroom and I probably couldn't have heard them from that far away anyhow.

* * * * *

He reached down into the bucket and quickly grabbed the huge, greyish-white fish with an old rusty pair of pliers that barely worked from the bottom of the tool box, and slung him all wet and

slippery on the newspaper. The fish flopped once, its tail slapping lightly on my wrist, leaving a warm, wet trail as it slowly slid off.

"Be careful of its barbs," my father warned. "They'll sting you."

His hands moved to the blackish head of the fish and he carefully placed his fingers to either side of the long, pointed fins and smoothed the one on top down with the palm of his hand. He then took a huge nail and with one smooth, sure stroke drove it through the creature's head and deep into the stump below. The fish arched, its fins pointing like my mother's grey nail file, and the flesh along its tail quivering as a rubber band would when you plucked it between your fingers. I reached up over the heads and guts of the fish that had been cleaned before this, and ran my thumb along the side of the fish, shocked at how soft and smooth it was. My father again warned me of its barbs, which looked very dangerous indeed, and I watched with horror and fascination as he took the pliers again and peeled back the skin. He then drew the knife, its sharp blade flashing in the sunlight, in long, careful slices, deftly removing the white and red and orange insides, and cut the blood-red meat to leave just the outline of the bones and its head, the eyes open,

staring, and its sides working, drawing the flaps along its head in and out, open and closed.

Before I discuss these fragments as instances of the female mode, I want to establish the context in which they are written. I see advanced composition, more than any other upper-level writing course such as technical writing, as a direct continuation of a freshman writing course. There, my goal is to ensure students have the minimal writing skills needed for success in college. Their writing practice derives primarily from their reading, selected from complementary disciplines such as literature and psychology, organized around a theme. Rhetorical theory is more implicit than explicit. In my advanced composition course, however, the focus changes. I tell students I want them to be aware of the options they have from the beginning of the writing process to its conclusion. If the course achieves its goal, students become freer as writers: through their understanding of the goals of a piece of discourse, their conception of audience, tests for acceptable evidence, types of arrangement and style, they can analyze a writing situation and respond appropriately. Currently, two modes of discourse, female and male, are my chief means for providing this awareness.

Students are likely to be familiar with the male mode since it is another way of characterizing traditional rhetoric. I want to define it here by using this paper as an example. My goal is to persuade you that here is an approach to an upper-level

composition course worth your consideration. I see you, my audience, as different from me. You are probably a little skeptical (the last thing we need is another trendy methodology) or perhaps tentatively supportive (at least I'll glance through the paper and see if she has anything worth saying). Anyone who is already a true believer or clearly hostile has most likely decided that his or her time is better spent elsewhere in this journal. As part of my strategy, I have tried to gather enough relevant detail to support important points in my paper, thereby increasing the chances that you will accept my overall goal. This paper's arrangement has the same purpose: if you accept my definition of the function of an advanced composition course, then you will see how the male and female modes are consistent with it and will soon see how a course might be structured with both in mind. In short, while this paper does not have the combative tone that we might associate with traditional rhetoric, my primary concern is consistent with that of the male mode: I want to get my point across in a clear, direct, convincing way.

If I were writing about my course in the female mode, I would not be writing this paper. I might instead have written something for circulation among a group of colleagues who I could assume would be sympathetic to my interests. What I would say might be one of a series of reflections detailing the evolution in my teaching of writing over the last ten years. Because my readers would have had similar experiences, this paper would strengthen the bonds among us; that is, it would integrate us,

not differentiate among us. Because I would be writing with this confidence, I would feel less defensive, less need to marshall the evidence to meet the standards of an inductively strong argument. The paper's structure would also reflect my sense of solidarity with my audience: it could afford to proceed in an indirect, intuitive way to the conclusion, which might not ever be explicitly stated, or if it were, would come at the end, a natural outgrowth of the essay as a record of my thought process.

One can make many of the same comments about the student example with which I began this paper. Tom was writing for other students in the class, who were also attempting to capture something essential about their childhoods--in other words, people likely to be sympathetic. In all four fragments, he was trying to convey a sense of the security of growing up in a large family: the first was on the strength of his older brothers and the second on the appealing smells in the cellar of his home. There is no explicit connection between the fragments, although they form a kind of psychological pattern: the first and last are on what we often think of as masculine topics; the middle two are traditionally feminine--they occur inside and the emphasis is on warmth, security, softness, comfort. Because Tom uses concrete details so effectively to recall experiences we have all had or might like to have had, other students in the class had no trouble identifying the purpose he had originally set himself.

The mode I have just described is not a stage on the way to another type of discourse. It is not the sort of expressive

writing which James Britton has said leads to the transactional or persuasive mode that characterizes this paper;[2] or, to use Linda Flower's terminology, it is not "writer-based prose," where Tom is writing solely for himself, reproducing whatever turns his thoughts happened to take, in phrases and words that may have meaning only to him.[3] Anyone who has taught technical writing has probably seen reports where a student has faithfully recorded what happened, but then not seen that for this piece of writing to serve its function in an organization, it must become "reader-based," be transformed into the transactional mode. If she is evaluating a new policy, she must re-order and edit the events in her narrative so they are now reasons for her evaluation.

How the female mode is an end in itself may be seen by considering it in the context of James Kinneavy's discussion of expressive discourse. Because the focus is on the encoder, "it is the speaking self which dominates the discourse and it is by discourse that he expresses and partially achieves his own individuality."[4] This emphasis on self does not become narcissistic, however, because one of its conditions is a sense of other people also as selves, not, as in writer-based prose, to be ignored, or, as in the male mode, to be made like one's self. The process of expressive discourse implies what its organization and logic will be like: we begin by assuming something is valued (Tom, his childhood; I, my teaching methods);[5] because this assumption makes us less defensive than if we were writing in a male mode situation, we are likely to think of concrete details

as ways of conveying what we value, not as part of what will help us pass the test of an inductively strong argument. Similarly, we can afford the indirectness in organization.

A definition of the female (and male) mode is incomplete without its being considered, however briefly, from an historical perspective. Mary Mason shows how women in their autobiographies define themselves through identification with some "other," an instance of the recognition of others' selves Kinneavy has identified as a feature of the expressive mode. Her examples include Margery Kempe from the fifteenth century, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and Anne Bradstreet from the seventeenth century, down to such contemporaries as Lillian Hellman and Margaret Mead.[6] In an analysis of two seventeenth century biographies, one by a man (Thomas Sprat) and one by a woman (Cavendish), Patricia Sullivan demonstrates how the two writers' contrasting approaches to their subjects result in male and female modes.[7]

Mary Hiatt's findings on the characteristics of contemporary women's fiction and non-fiction prose--"moderate in tone as compared to the men [in her study], well-balanced, rational, organized, and 'unextreme' in almost every aspect of their writing style"[8]--might seem inconsistent with what I have been describing as the female mode, but the discrepancies can be accounted for at least in part by the fact that her non-fiction by women includes works such as Phyllis Chesler's Women and Madness and Frances Fitzgerald's Fire in the Lake, books quite properly written in

the male mode. It is interesting to note, however, that even with these women writers using the male mode, Hiatt found that women are less likely to reach conclusions than are men--thus resulting in the open-ended effect I referred to earlier. Clear examples of the female mode may be seen in recent autobiographies such as Maureen Howard's Facts of Life (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978) and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). The most effective combination of the male and female mode I have seen recently is Jacobo Timerman's Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), where his accounts of the actual experience of being a political prisoner in Argentina in the late 1970's are done in the female mode, and he uses the male mode to provide historical and political commentary on the conditions surrounding his imprisonment.

When I use the male and female modes in an advanced composition course, most of my course is oriented toward the male mode. It is, after all, the mode in which students write their papers in other courses (one can imagine the reaction of a colleague in the History Department when a student asked if she could write her papers for him in the female mode) and the mode in which they will later be writing their memos, legal briefs, medical reports, or scholarly articles.

Students demonstrate their competence in the male mode about two-thirds of the way through the course by writing two extended

arguments on contrasting sides of an issue. They must also evaluate both their arguments in writing. They have prepared for this assignment by doing others designed to build the skills this one calls on: they have written abstracts to give them practice in summarizing information clearly and accurately; they have also analyzed other people's arguments using standards for evaluating inductive arguments. After they have identified the premises and conclusion in an argument, they have criteria they must apply to show how well-supported each premise is; taking all the premises together, they must then assess the strength of the link between premises and conclusion. With this sort of preparation, students can then move on to constructing and analyzing their own arguments with some degree of confidence.

I do not move directly from the male to the female mode because I want students to experience additional combinations as the variables of audience, standards for evaluating evidence, arrangement, and style change. Thus, I move next to Rogerian argument, which, although this description sounds paradoxical, uses male mode strategies to achieve female mode goals of acceptance and cooperation.

In Rogerian argument,[9] one views the audience as hostile and not simply skeptical or mildly supportive. The same concerns for standards of evidence and arrangement obtain as in the male mode, but they are applied differently. One states the audience's position with as much care and completeness as one states one's own; one also uses the tools of logical thinking to identify

common ground between the two positions. Techniques of organization are used, not to lead readers inexorably to the writer's conclusion, but instead to reduce the threat the audience most likely feels and to prepare them psychologically for the acceptance and cooperation which the writer hopes to be the outcome of the discourse. The audience's position is stated first, followed by an exploration of the common ground between the positions, and only then does the writer present his or her position. Throughout, the writer attempts to maintain an even tone. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is an example of a Rogerian argument in spirit if not in the exact letter I have described here.

Finally, we are ready for the female mode, where one's notions of goals, audience, arrangement, standards for evidence, and style are all different from the male mode. I ask students to put themselves in this situation: they are writing for a sympathetic audience, where they can take the risk of making their writing a <u>record</u> and not, as in the male mode, a <u>product</u> of their thinking. They use the female mode in a situation where they are describing themselves or someone else, evoking a mood, or reflecting in a more general way. As in Rogerian argument, because they want their readers to identify with them, they rely on detail, arranged not to support a premise, but more intuitively to enable a reader to experience what the writer is describing. The directness and efficiency in the male mode give way to the indirectness of the female.

Competent male mode writers, male and female, sometimes have trouble making the transition to the female mode. Here, for example, are key sentences in the first paragraph of a woman's recalling her childhood insomnia, using what was supposed to be the female mode:

> Only frequent insomnia victims truly understand the frustration suffered by one who lies awake, watching the late hours turn into the early morning hours. . . . Insomnia and its after effects have been familiar to me for as long as I can remember. . . . Experience has shown me that being a light sleeper has its advantages and its disadvantages. . . .

Once learned, good male mode habits of clear exposition are hard to let go of. Failures such as this are valuable teaching devices, however: one can use them to show what the female mode is not, and how in some situations, it can be much more effective than the male.

For me, using the female and male modes to order an advanced composition course raises two important issues. However careful I might be to demonstrate that the female mode does not fit the rambling, irrational stereotype of women's writing that Hiatt debunks, expecting students to keep those distinctions clear may be unrealistic. Some women colleagues with whom I have discussed my course have expressed this concern. Because I have thus far introduced the female mode at the end of the course and do not

have extensive experience with it, I have no convincing evidence with which to allay my colleagues' fears. An incident this spring was encouraging: a former student said he had used what he knew about the male and female modes when he was reading over another student's paper, trying to explain to her why he thought his paper had received a higher grade. Hers, he said, was written in the female mode and the nature of the assignment called for the male mode. Initially, she was offended by the assessment, but when he defined his terms, he said she then had a clearer sense of what she should have done. It is this same sensitivity to the appropriateness of both modes toward which I am working.

Using the female and male modes may also fail the test of simplicity. I could organize the course, as I used to, around reference, persuasive, and expressive discourse. But the course would lose its edge: a course plan exists as a piece of rhetoric; by using more neutral terms, I would lose some of the appeal to emotion provided by the terms "female" and "male," not to mention the clarity with which both delineate the possibilities and limitations of either response in a rhetorical situation. Students may be skeptical, but they are always interested, both when I describe the plan for the course and its rationale and when they finally have the chance to experiment with the female mode. This approach has its risks, but so far they have been risks worth taking.

Notes

[1] I began thinking of how one might use the female and male modes in a course after I read Thomas J. Farrell's article, "The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric," College English, 40 (1979), 909-921. My definitions of the modes owe much to Farrell, as does my linking of them to Rogerian argument, later in the paper.

[2] The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18 (London: Macmillan Education Press, 1975).

[3] "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English, 41 (1979), 19-20.

[4] A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 398. There are, of course, other types of expressive discourse. For examples from Kinneavy, see p. 393.

[5] Kinneavy, p. 421.

[6] "Autobiographies of Women Writers," in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 207-235. For a discussion of the female mode and its relationship to the development of the novel, see Josephine Donovan, "The Silence Is Broken," in Women and Language in Literature and Society, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), pp. 205-218.

[7] "Female Writing Beside the Rehetorical Tradition: Seventeenth Century British Biography and a Female Tradition in Rhetoric," International Journal of Women's Studies, 3 (1980), 143-160.

[8] The Way Women Write (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), p. 135.

[9] For one description of Rogerian argument, see Maxine Hairston's "Carl Rogers's Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric," College Composition and Communication 27 (1976), 373-377.